

Ancient Macedonia builds modern democracy

By Stephanie Rowlands

Macedonia. The word evokes images of ancient civilizations, with men in togas and sandals bearing spears and shields. It also evokes modern European history—the emergence and realignment of nations as the Ottoman Empire waned. The geographic region of Macedonia, a natural crossroads, has through the centuries been contested by kingdoms and empires. Today, major portions of historical Macedonia lie within neighboring countries. The Republic of Macedonia is seeking to build upon deep traditions of tolerance, learning and peaceful development. The diverse mix of cultures, religions, languages and geography makes this country appealing to many Americans.

Macedonia's history and culture produce debate within the Balkan region. Many Bulgarians do not view the Macedonian language as distinct from Bulgarian; many Serbians dismiss the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church; and – most contentious of all – Greece objects to the country's name. The dispute with Greece over Macedonia's constitutional name has hindered its inclusion into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Ever since the country declared independence in 1991, Greece has objected to the use of the name "Macedonia," resulting in the postponement of Macedonia's inclusion in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union accession talks. Macedonia continues to be referred in the United Nations and other international organizations as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or „FYROM“. The United States has officially used Republic of Macedonia since 2004.



Inter-ethnic Strides

Macedonia escaped the war that accompanied the dissolution of the Yugoslavian Federation and remained at peace through the establishment of its independence in 1991. Between March and August 2001, though, an internal conflict erupted between ethnic Albanians and the government. International mediation ended the fighting, with the Ohrid Framework Agreement providing guidelines for broader political and cultural pluralism, diversity and respect for minorities. The United States is among the guarantors of the agreement and continues to aid in its fulfillment.

Ethnic Macedonians, who are predominantly Orthodox Christian, make up close to 65% of the country's population. Ethnic Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks, who are predominantly Muslim, make up a quarter, and Serbs, Roma, Vlachs and others make up smaller percentages. Though inter-ethnic tensions persist, progress

is being made. Since independence, every government has been a coalition of ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian, Roma, Serb, Turk, and other political parties, including ministers of several other ethnicities. The United States actively promotes stronger relationships among all the people of Macedonia. One recent example was a Day of Remembrance for 9/11, when the U.S. Embassy in Skopje partnered with the Skopje Red Cross to hold an inter-faith blood and food drive. Several hundred ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Albanians and members of other communities came together to donate blood, food and money to aid those in need.

Strategic Partnership

Since Macedonia's independence in 1991, the United States and Macedonia have had a strong bilateral relationship. Macedonia has been a steadfast security partner, sending soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of them have received medals for their distinguished service in both theaters.

The United States has provided more than a billion dollars to support Macedonia's transition to a free-market democracy, build civil society and aid progress toward full Euro-Atlantic integration. The assistance has mostly focused on stimulating economic development, improving education, modernizing the military and strengthening rule of law.

More than 1,000 Macedonians have attended training, exchange or study programs in the United States in the last 18 years. Several hundred of them celebrated the partnership at a November 2009 alumni reception. Together, Macedonia and the United States are cultivating the leaders of today and tomorrow.

Another aspect of bilateral cooperation is working to preserve Macedonia's rich cultural heritage. Hundreds of 14th- to 16th-century monasteries, mosques, Turkish baths and churches are filled with intricate woodwork, frescoes and architecture. The U.S. Embassy in Skopje has used the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation to help restore such structures throughout the country. Recently, the embassy also received a large grant to team with the Macedonian Ministry of Culture to preserve and restore the architecture and frescoes of the 13th-century Peribleptos Church in Ohrid.

The embassy's move to new grounds in April 2009 underscored the United States' enduring commitment to the young country. Today, Ambassador Philip Reeker leads a mission of more than 300 local and U.S. staff representing six agencies and departments.

The Pearl of the Balkans

Macedonia's diverse terrain matches its rich history. Its national parks showcase the country's beauty. Waterfalls, gorges, canyons, mountains, ski slopes and fields of wildflowers can be seen from well-marked trails. Unmarked paths can be even more exciting, leading to hidden ruins of centuries past, monasteries, wineries and berry patches. Under sapphire blue skies, sheep bells ring over the hills and shepherds carry intricately carved staffs. Spectacular sunsets are mirrored in Lake Ohrid, the Pearl of the Balkans, and a UNESCO World Heritage site. The New York Times listed Lake Ohrid as one of "The 31 Places to Go in 2010." Surrounded by the mountains of Macedonia, the lake is sprinkled with blue-bottomed boats, while cobblestone streets, ancient monasteries, an amphitheater and fortress beckon travelers to step back in time.

Visitors can view archeology in action throughout Macedonia. In Heraclea and Stobi, hundreds of workers with wheelbarrows, shovels and picks unearth 7th- to 4th-century B.C. artifacts, mosaics and buildings. Visitors walk down the same streets founded by Philip II of Macedon and later used by the Romans.

Life in Skopje

Life in Skopje, a city of some 600,000 inhabitants, is laid-back and safe. The embassy's direct-hire employees and their families enjoy a welcoming atmosphere. They can ride bikes along the Vardar River and stroll through Gradski Park. Mount Vodno, with its 74-meter lighted cross, towers over Skopje and is a 20-minute drive from embassy neighborhoods. Vodno's trails connect the summit to Lake Matka, a manmade lake cutting into the steep Treska Valley ravine. Rock climbers, hikers and boaters weave through evergreens, caves, secluded monasteries and ruins.



Throughout Skopje, open-air markets teem with local produce. Pyramids of tomatoes and red peppers, mountains of cabbage and vats of fresh cheese and olives fill bazaars in every neighborhood. The call to prayer echoes through cobblestone streets as merchants of leather, filigree and baklava beckon customers. Kale, the remains of a fortress dating from Neolithic times and reestablished by various rulers since, looms over the city center, while the 15th-century stone bridge connects the old Turkish town to the modern European center. The sounds of the latest “world music” thump into the morning hours from the trendiest nightclub.

This cacophony of old and new is modern-day Macedonia, with a grip on history and its eyes to the future.